

Keats Essay by Cormac Kelly

Whether it is through the hollow aftermath of fleeting love or the futility in searching for everlasting pleasure, Keats grapples with both the pain and beauty of human existence through love, in “When I have fears that I may cease to be”, poetry in “Ode to a Nightingale”, enchanted beauty in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” and art in “On First Looking Into Chapman’s Homer.”

In “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” Keats tackles the theme of mortality and deception. Through his metaphorical yet at times simple language Keats tells the story of a dying knight lamenting over the loss of love. “On thy cheeks a fading rose” from this we see the knight-at-arms, the antithesis of the conventional image of a knight, is coloured with the pallor of ill-health. The knight, “haggard and woe-begone” is in immense pain following the fleeting love with an enchantress, and remembers “cherry wild”, when he was in love and nature was thriving. He was tricked by the enchantress with her “faery’s song” who was “full beautiful.” Now he comes to terms with his existence in a dystopian wasteland where “no birds sing.” In his metaphorical language, seeing “pale kings and princes too.” We see Keats is expressing clearly the pain of human existence as we see many people suffered at the hands of the enchantress. “I saw their starved lips in the gloam.” This quote paints a vivid image of the desperation and suffering of people duped by love as he was. Juxtaposing the enchanting beauty of the mysterious woman with the painful decay of the knight Keats touches on the conflicting range of feelings of pain and beauty of human existence.

In “Ode to a Nightingale” Keats focuses on the search for lasting solace through descriptive, sensuous language. “My heart aches.” In the beginning there is an image of pain as Keats curses the dull nature and the “fret” of human existence. He seeks to find escape from this pain through a “draught of vintage” when he can be transported to a place of “dance and provencal song.” A place of indulgence and pleasure. But he cannot find lasting relief from pain. From “Bacchus and his pards” we see a literary allusion and although he often finds beauty in poetry, he now wishes to immerse himself in “poesy” for lasting joy. In his wonderfully vivid language Keats shows images such as “purple-stained mouth” to show indulgence in pleasure. Suicide is even contemplated through subtle language, because the pain of human existence is almost unbearable, “where but to think is to be full of sorrow.” In the end, even through the beauty of poetry and the joy of alcohol he cannot find permanent solace in his life and must return to reality.

In “When I have Fears that I may cease to be” Keats explores pain and beauty of life through wonderful metaphorical language. He wishes to fully express himself in writing before he dies. “Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain.” Here we see Keats’ pain and anguish as he tries to immerse himself in the beauty of life’s riches. Diagnosed with tuberculosis and having lost his brother to the illness, Keats was all too familiar with his own mortality. But Keats manages to capture also the beauty in human existence in “unreflecting love” as he yearns for free, unconditional love. In “To Autumn” which celebrates the beauty of spring and the cycle of life, he finds a healing beauty in nature as he finds a powerful beauty in poetry in “When I have Fears that I may cease to be.”

In “On First Looking into Chapman’s Home” we see Keats is expressing veneration for Chapman and Homer but also the beauty of poetry, which he describes through metaphorical language. “Much have I travelled in the realms of gold” He is dealing with the pain of human existence and is able to transcend reality to through Chapman’s translation of the Iliad. He feels like some “watcher of the skies” and was able to escape painful reality and find beauty. In contrast to “Where I have long been in city pent” Keats feels utterly suffocated in the city and cannot transcend reality to “realms of gold” and must face the pain of human existence.

Through sorrow, passion and longing, Keats unlocks his innermost feelings as he attempts to escape the pain of human existence through poetry and art, seeks alcohol and other means, and does what he can to find beauty of human existence, most often through love of life's treasures.